

## **The Devadasis: Wives of the Gods**

Devadasi literally means “maid servant of god” (Goswami xxiv). ‘Deva’ means god and ‘dasi’ means female servant. The Devadasis are women who (either voluntarily or given up) are married to a god and from then serve in that god’s temple. The earliest evidence of such women is found in a cavern just south of Banaras. The cave is carved with Prakrit writing from around the days of Ashoka and reads: “The excellent young man Devadinna the painter loved Utanuka, the slave-girl of the God” (Chakraborty 18). The art of the Devadasis has continued to today.

The role of women in the Indian society has gone through changes up to the modern day. Some suspect that women were respected in ancient Indian culture since Manu stated that “where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes, but where they are not unhappy, the family ever prospers” (Chakraborty 2). Men were aware of the importance of women as essential to marriage, family, and child bearing. For women’s protection the first real law on marriage for girls was the Child Marriage Restraint Act (Sarda Act) 1927, which stated that it was illegal for girls to marry below the age of 14 (Chakraborty 9). However, women were not able to own property until the Hindu Women’s Right to Property Act allowed them to own property jointly with their husbands (Chakraborty 9). One of the most respectable ways a woman could serve her community was to become a servant of god. Women would dutifully marry a deity and serve in the temple for the rest of her life. It was originally a noble position to hold, but sadly, as history took its course, the role of the Devadasis became more and more degraded.

The origins of the Devadasis are a little obscure. An actual founder is still unknown (Chakraborty 13). One speculation is that the gods were viewed as feudal lords and the virgin girls were offered for service to please the gods (Chakraborty 16). Another theory, by Sir James

Frazer, is that the girls were models of a Great Mother Goddess, who had many lovers, which coincides with the idea that the Devadasis were for “sacred prostitution” (Chakraborty 15). Another more commonly held view of the derivation of the dancing girls is that because women needed to marry, and it was a great disgrace for a husband to die, marrying a deity would result in an eternal marriage. This gave the women immediate and lasting auspiciousness (Goswami xxiv). It was said that the “Devadasis who were married to deities were regarded with honour as celestial nymphs” (Goswami xxiv). When women leave their families to marry, their parents no longer have any rights to them; she is wholly her husband’s. For the parents’ sake, if their daughter was to marry a deity, she would be free to look after her parents in their old age (Chakraborty 16). Once the tradition became established however, parents kept the custom alive. Women of the community often would request favours from the gods (usually to have a safe birth), and promised in return that they would give their daughters to the temple (Chakraborty 16). Some families even led a tradition in which “a girl from each generation is compulsorily dedicated to God” (Chakraborty 16).

Not all women were chosen equally to be a Devadasi. A woman needed to be attractive, smart, audacious, a hard worker, lively, skilled in dance, and have many other good qualities (Goswami xxv). A parent could offer a child from birth, but these qualifications were for women who gave themselves to the temple. There was a special type of marriage ceremony for women who were joining the Devadasis. The first part was a vow, which was made, in some cases, before the child was even born, and offered the girl as a gift to the deity (Chakraborty 28). Following the marriage the Devadasi would be owned by the temple (Chakraborty 28). The girl then applied oils and bathed, and went to the temple to give gifts to the custodian, who then stood as a proxy for the girl in a worship ceremony (Chakraborty 29). The girl then receives a

“sacred necklace of beads” and her parents celebrated by feeding the neighbourhood, exactly as a real marriage feast would be conducted (Chakraborty 29). Once the girl had been officially brought into the marriage with the deity, and had fully become a Devadasis, she was trained in the arts of her profession. Sometimes when there were too many girls in a temple, some were allowed to deviate from dancing and singing, and do such activities as acting. These girls were known as Patradavaru (Chakraborty 25). The duties of the Devadasis were to sing and dance in the morning and evening, attend marriages and other family gatherings, to bring auspiciousness to the family/couple (Chakraborty 30, Goswami xxiv). In return for their work the girls received “money and a platform to present their art” (Soneji 30). The Devadasis did not live in the temples, but were given tax free land by the royal family (Goswami xxvii).

The central part of the Devadasis’ work was the dancing, which was set to music. Music, which is pleasant to the ears, also “contributes to the growth of mind and body” (Goswami xx). The music that the Devadasis dance to was originally played by instruments called ‘khols’ and ‘tals’, but were later replaced by a modern violin (Goswami xxvi). Many of the dances, and the songs came from the influential texts; such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the Puranas (Goswami xxi). The dances may also have association with gods, such a Siva (Goswami xxii). The importance of the dances were to entertain the gods and people, to earn money for the temples, and to help make the religion more widely accepted in the community (Goswami xxi).

The auspiciousness of the Devadasis was continuous so that these “servants of God” had superior status over the other women. A Devadasi did not become ritually impure even when she was menstruating. Therefore she could dance all month long. Nor was she made unclean by a death of someone near her (Soneji 42).

The Devadasis tradition began with the girls being wholesome brides of the gods, but through the generations their morality decayed. Since the girls had to be virgins when they married the deity, they would fulfil their “carnal appetites” with the “priests and aristocrats” (Goswami xxiv). Since the girls danced for the public, rich men were able to observe the beautiful girls, who were then easy prey for prostitution. In the early twentieth century, the younger generations for Devadasis expressed no problem in being paid for sexual favours (Soneji 39).

The Devadasis were once a respected part of the Hindu society, with very important religious responsibilities. Now, though there are hardly any left, the women are exploited for prostitution. The devoted girls who either dedicated themselves, or were given to the temple from birth, still hold important roles in the worship of the deities, but their status in the community has diminished. If the Devadasis could regain their reputation, they could again be the most respected women of Hindu societies.

## **Bibliography and Recommend Readings**

Chakraborty, Kakolee (2000) *Women As Devadasis: Origin and Growth of the Devadasi Profession*. Rajouri Garden, ND: Deep & Deep Publications.

Goswami, Kali Prasad (2000) *Devadasi: Dancing Damsel*. Darya Ganj, ND: A.P Publishing Corporation.

Orr, Leslie C. (2000) *Donors, Devotees, and Daughters of God*. Oxford, NY: Oxford UP.

Rodrigues, Hillary (2006) *Hinduism - the Ebook*. Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, Ltd.

Soneji, Davesh (2004) *Living History, Performing Memory: Devadasi Women in Telugu-Speaking South India*. Dance Research Journal, Vol. 36, Issue 2, p30-49.

## **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

Great Mother Goddess

Manu

Marriage

Patradavaru

The Ramayana

The Mahabharata

The Puranas

Siva

Temples

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### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devadasi>

<http://www.samarthbharat.com/devadasis.htm>

<http://www.samarthbharat.com/files/devadasihistory.pdf>

<http://skepdic.com/devadasi.html>

<http://tribes.tribe.net/devadasis>

<http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/women/devadasi.htm>

**Article written by: Rebecca Bouchard (March 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.**